Kamma: The Weavers Thread

by Dipabhasadhamma

Illustration by Dipabhasadhamma

Beneath the Bodhi tree, the Buddha shared,
A truth profound, with wisdom declared:
Not stars, nor chance, nor unseen will,
But actions crafted through thought and skill.

"Kamma," he said, "is intention's stream,
The force behind life's shifting dream.
Through body, speech, and mind, we weave,
The tapestry of what we conceive."

Why do some live with joy and grace,
While others toil in a troubled place?
Why is one born to health and peace,
While another's trials seem never to cease?

Acts of kindness, generosity, and care,
Shape a world of joy, serene and fair.
Harmful deeds, by anger inflamed,
Bring forth suffering, sorrow unnamed.

Yet kamma flows, not fixed or bound,
Its course is shaped by what's around.
Through mindful steps, with wisdom's art,
We transform the seeds within the heart.

"Intention is the source," the Buddha taught,
The origin from which all actions are wrought.
Not deed alone, but the mind's refrain,
Determines the harvest of pleasure or pain.

The Sutta[1] does make clear,
The ties between joy and life's veneer.
Why some may prosper, while others strive,
The law of kamma keeps it alive.

Do good, and goodness will arise,
A life of ease, with open skies.
Harm sown deep by careless hand,
Will sprout in sorrow, like arid land.

Yet freedom lies within our grasp,
To shape the future, unbind the clasp.
Through heedful thought and present care,
We cleanse our kamma and lay life bare.

No being erases what we have done,
Yet wisdom redeems the misguided one.
For here and now, the choice is ours,
To act with clarity, reclaim our powers.

Awake to kamma, its truth profound,
See how it shapes the world around.
Yet through this law, a path does shine,
To end all craving, the aim refined.

So let us act with a mindful heart,
Choosing wisely the life we start.
Each thought, each word, each deed we do,
Shapes not just the world, but the self anew.

"Cetanā[ii]," the Buddha said, clear and wise,
"Is kamma, the thread where intention lies.
Through willful thought, by word and deed,
The seeds of life are sown and freed."

Not by chance, nor unseen hand,
But by choices made, we shape our land.
Kamma flows where volition leads,
A field of actions sprouting deeds.

With body, speech, and mind combined,
The heart's intent leaves trails behind.
Wholesome acts, like sunlight bright,
Dispel the darkness, invite the light.

Yet acts of harm, from anger sprung,
Lay paths of sorrow yet unsung.
For kamma, though unseen, is real,
Its fruits the heart must one day feel.

No fate decrees, no force compels,
But volition's tide forever swells.
Through heedful care, the course can bend,
Toward peace, where suffering ends.

The Buddha's words in wisdom shine:
"Kamma is will, the heart's design.
Having willed, one acts with care,
In body, speech, and mind laid bare."

So, what we choose in each small thought,
Creates the world we've always sought.
A mindful heart, a steadfast way,
Transforms the night into the day.

Thus, kamma's truth, a mirror clear,
Reflects the seeds we plant right here.
Through wholesome deeds, the path unfolds,
A life of peace, the treasure untold.

But deeper still, the truth does sing:
Freedom lies in understanding.
When craving fades and wisdom grows,
The wheel of rebirth gently slows.

Awake to volition, this subtle thread,
The fabric of life by which we're led.
Yet through this thread, a truth profound:
By letting go, true freedoms found.

Each thought, each act, a choice anew,
A path to walk, a self to renew.
With kamma's reins held in our hand,
We shape the life in which we stand.

So, tread with care, the Buddha said,
For kamma's fruits are widely spread.
And in this truth, the way appears:
A path beyond all worldly fears.

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Why Modern People Find Kamma Difficult to Grasp

1. **Misrepresentation in Popular Culture**:
    - Kamma is often reduced to a form of cosmic revenge or "instant justice" (e.g., "What goes around comes around"), which oversimplifies its depth and leads to misunderstandings.
    - Media representations often distort kamma into a linear, almost magical mechanism that operates in a tit-for-tat manner, ignoring its broader implications of intentionality and moral causation.
2. **Confusion with Determinism or Fate**:
    - Many assume that kamma implies predestination or fatalism, believing that everything in life is already determined by past actions, which contradicts the Buddha's teachings on personal agency and the ability to shape the future.
3. **Interference from Religious Dogma**:
    - In societies influenced by Abrahamic religions, the concept of kamma can clash with notions of divine will, sin, or grace, leading to skepticism or outright rejection of its moral framework.
4. **Lack of Understanding of Intention (Cetanā)**:
    - The central role of **cetanā** (volition or intention) in kamma is often overlooked. People focus on external actions rather than the inner motivations driving them, missing the nuance of ethical causality.
5. **Overwhelmed by Cultural Noise**:
    - The modern world bombards individuals with conflicting worldviews, social norms, and misinformation, making it difficult for people to discern authentic teachings from cultural clutter.

Explanation of Kamma in Simple Terms

1. What It Is Not
- Kamma is not punishment or reward handed down by a deity or external force.
- It is not a fixed destiny or unavoidable fate.
- It is not about judging others but understanding oneself.

2. Kamma Clearly Defined
- **Kamma means intentional action.** It refers to the choices we make—what we think, say, and do—and the ripple effects those choices create.
- The Buddha taught that our actions shape our experiences, not because of supernatural forces, but due to the natural law of cause and effect.

3. Practical Examples
- **Mental kamma**: "If you hold onto anger, you feel stress and unhappiness. If you cultivate kindness, you feel peace and connection."
- **Verbal kamma**: "Speaking harshly might hurt someone and lead to conflict, while speaking kindly fosters trust and harmony."
- **Physical kamma**: "Helping someone in need creates goodwill, while harming others brings fear and suffering into your life."

4. Emphasis on Personal Responsibility
- Kamma isn't about blame—it's about empowerment. It reminds us that we have the ability to shape our lives through our choices.
- Unlike deterministic systems, the Buddha's teaching on kamma includes the possibility of change and growth. If you've made mistakes, you can create new, wholesome kamma starting now.

5. Connection to Modern Values
- Relate kamma to psychological concepts like mindfulness or cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT): "Your thoughts, words, and actions create patterns in your mind, just as habits shape your life."
- Highlight the importance of ethical living: "Kamma is about being mindful of how you treat others and yourself because your actions leave a lasting impact."

6. Misconceptions Addressed

- If someone views kamma as too abstract, explain that it operates naturally, much like planting seeds in a garden. "Good seeds produce good fruit; bad seeds produce thorns. The garden reflects the care you've given it."
- For those who see kamma as punitive, emphasize its neutrality: "It's not about punishment—it's about understanding consequences and learning how to make better choices."

Why This Explanation Matters

A modern person saturated with conflicting religious, social, and cultural ideas often seeks clarity, simplicity, and relevance. By framing **kamma** as a practical, natural law rooted in intention and cause-and-effect, it becomes less about dogma and more about personal empowerment and responsibility.

Editor's Critique: The poem **"Kamma: The Weaver's Thread"** offers a poetic yet deeply philosophical exploration of the Buddha's teachings on kamma, grounding its insights in the Pali Canon. Dipabhasadhamma, the author of this work, intricately unravels the concept of kamma, presenting it as a dynamic process governed by **cetanā** (volition), rather than as a fatalistic or externally imposed law. This shift in perspective underscores the agency and responsibility inherent in human life—a central theme of the Buddha's teachings.

What distinguishes this poem is its capacity to transform complex doctrinal teachings into vivid and accessible imagery. The metaphor of the "weaver's thread" symbolizes the intentional actions that intertwine to create the fabric of our lives, reflecting the causality of our thoughts, words, and deeds. Dipabhasadhamma contrasts acts of kindness, depicted as flourishing gardens, with harmful deeds that yield barren, thorny landscapes. This duality underscores the moral implications of kamma while inviting the reader to engage with its ethical dimensions on a personal level.

The poem does more than describe kamma; it critiques passive interpretations of this law. By aligning closely with the **Nibbedhika Sutta** and the **Cūlakammavibhaṅga Sutta**, the poet challenges deterministic views, encouraging readers to see kamma as a tool for self-transformation rather than an immutable fate. The emphasis on mindfulness and ethical living as pathways to transcendence reflects the Buddha's teaching that liberation from **saṃsāra** is attainable through effort and wisdom.

One of the poem's strongest messages is its portrayal of kamma as both a force of connection and liberation. The imagery of an illuminated path leading beyond the wheel of rebirth evokes the profound truth that while kamma governs worldly existence, understanding and transcending it is key to ultimate freedom. The title "Kamma: The Weaver's Thread" reinforces this focus, highlighting the personal agency involved in shaping one's life and future, for we are the weaver.

Dipabhasadhamma's work stands out as a meditation and critique, offering a fresh lens through which to view the Buddha's teachings. By challenging misconceptions and inspiring reflection, "Kamma: The Weaver's Thread" serves as both a philosophical guide and an artistic homage to the transformative power of intentional action. It invites readers to actively engage with the moral and liberative potential of the Buddha's insights, making it a compelling and enduring contribution to contemporary Dhamma thought. **– Panna Foundation Publishing, S.M. Editor**

End Notes

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[i] Cūlakammavibhaṅga Sutta (MN 135) (*Choo-la, kah-mah, vee-bahn-gah*). The key teaching is that kamma functions through volition (cetanā), emphasizing moral responsibility and the ability to influence future outcomes. The Cūlakammavibhaṅga Sutta (MN 135) from the Majjhima Nikāya, often titled "***The Shorter Exposition of Kamma***," provides a detailed explanation of how intentional actions (kamma) lead to specific outcomes in a person's life. It addresses the apparent inequalities and differences among beings, such as why some are wealthy while others are poor, why some are beautiful while others are not, and why some experience happiness while others face suffering.

Key I□sights from the S□tta:

1. **Kamma as the Root of I□eq□alities**: The B□ddha explai□s that differe□ces amo□g bei□gs arise from their actio□s, which are rooted i□ volitio□. Wholesome actio□s (k□sala kamma) bri□g be□eficial res□lts, while □□wholesome actio□s (ak□sala kamma) lead to s□fferi□g.

2. **Specific Ca□ses a□d Effects**: The B□ddha ide□tifies partic□lar actio□s that lead to specific res□lts, s□ch as:
   - Killi□g leads to a short lifespa□, while abstai□i□g from killi□g leads to lo□gevity.
   - Harsh speech leads to □gli□ess, while ge□tle speech leads to bea□ty.
   - Sti□gi□ess leads to poverty, while ge□erosity leads to wealth.
   - Harbori□g e□vy leads to a lack of i□fl□e□ce, while rejoici□g i□ others' s□ccess leads to bei□g i□fl□e□tial.
3. **Kamma is Not Determi□istic**: Altho□gh kamma i□fl□e□ces experie□ces, it is □ot the sole factor determi□i□g o□e's life. The B□ddha ack□owledges the role of □at□ral co□ditio□s, effort, a□d mi□df□l□ess i□ shapi□g o□tcomes.
4. **Liberatio□ Beyo□d Kamma**: U□dersta□di□g kamma a□d its effects helps practitio□ers live ethically a□d skillf□lly, b□t liberatio□ (□ibbā□a) lies beyo□d kamma, achieved thro□gh wisdom a□d the cessatio□ of cravi□g.

Str□ct□re of the S□tta:

The **Cūlakammavibhaṅga S□tta** is str□ct□red as a dialog□e. A yo□□g ma□ □amed S□bha approaches the B□ddha a□d asks why there are differe□ces i□ people's lives. The B□ddha respo□ds systematically, explai□i□g how specific actio□s lead to partic□lar res□lts, emphasizi□g the moral ca□sality i□here□t i□ kamma.

A partic□larly importa□t li□e from the Pali Ca□o□ is: ***"Cetanāhaṃ, bhikkhave, kammaṃ vadāmi: cetayitvā kammaṃ karoti kāyena vācāya manasā."*** "It is volitio□, mo□ks, that I call kamma; for havi□g willed, o□e acts by body, speech, a□d mi□d."

Aṅg□ttara Nikāya, Chapter 6, S□tta 63) "**Nibbedhika S□tta**" – **The Pe□etrative Disco□rse**.

I□ this s□tta, the B□ddha elaborates o□ the □at□re of kamma, emphasizi□g the ce□tral role of volitio□ (ceta□ā) i□ defi□i□g what co□stit□tes kamma. "Ceta□āhaṃ, bhikkhave, kammaṃ vadāmi: cetayitvā kammaṃ karoti kāye□a vācāya ma□asā", is ofte□ q□oted to explai□ that kamma origi□ates from i□te□tio□al actio□s performed thro□gh the three ave□□es: body (kāya), speech (vācā), a□d mi□d (ma□asā*). This teaching clarifies that kamma is not merely about the external act but is deeply rooted in the will and intention behind the action*, maki□g it a ce□tral compo□e□t of ethical co□d□ct a□d the law of ca□se a□d effect i□ the B□ddha's teachi□gs.

[ii] The Pali word ceta□ā (*che-tuhn- nah*) is ofte□ tra□slated as i□te□tio□, volitio□, or will. It refers to the me□tal factor that drives i□te□tio□al actio□s, whether thro□gh body, speech, or mi□d. I□ the B□ddha's teachi□gs, ceta□ā is ce□tral to the co□cept of kamma (karma) beca□se it determi□es the ethical q□ality of a□ actio□.
Key Aspects of Ceta□ā:

1. I□te□tio□ality: Ceta□ā sig□ifies the deliberate aspect of a□ actio□. The B□ddha emphasized this i□ the Aṅg□ttara Nikāya (AN 6.63) whe□ he said:
   "Cetanāhaṃ, bhikkhave, kammaṃ vadāmi."
   ("It is volitio□, mo□ks, that I call kamma.")
   This □□derscores that the moral val□e of a□ actio□ depe□ds □ot j□st o□ what is do□e, b□t why it is do□e.

2. Co□□ectio□ to Kamma:
   Kamma arises whe□ a□ actio□ is performed with i□te□tio□. Whether a□ actio□ is co□sidered wholesome (k□sala) or □□wholesome (ak□sala) depe□ds o□ the q□ality of the ceta□ā behi□d it. For example:
   - Wholesome i□te□tio□s, s□ch as compassio□ or ge□erosity, lead to positive o□tcomes.
   - U□wholesome i□te□tio□s, s□ch as greed or a□ger, lead to □egative o□tcomes.

3. Pervasive I□fl□e□ce:
   Ceta□ā is a □□iversal me□tal factor prese□t i□ every co□scio□s actio□. It gover□s all actio□s of body, speech, a□d mi□d, li□ki□g them to their ethical co□seq□e□ces.

4. Liberative I□sight:
   I□ the co□text of the B□ddhist path, c□ltivati□g right i□te□tio□ (sammā-saṅkappa) as part of the Noble Eightfold Path i□volves alig□i□g ceta□ā with ethical a□d liberative goals, s□ch as □o□-harmi□g, re□□□ciatio□, a□d compassio□. U□dersta□di□g a□d refi□i□g ceta□ā is i□tegral to breaki□g the cycle of saṃsāra.

Ceta□ā represe□ts a profo□□d recog□itio□ of h□ma□ age□cy a□d moral respo□sibility i□ shapi□g o□e's life a□d f□t□re, formi□g the fo□□datio□ of the B□ddha's ethical a□d meditative teachi□gs.